

Japan Suspends Work on U.S. Base on Okinawa



People protest the planned relocation of the U.S. military base on Okinawa in Tokyo April 17, 2015.

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan said on Tuesday it was suspending construction of a contentious U.S. air base on the island of Okinawa for a month to give time for talks between the central government and island authorities opposed to the facility.

Residents of Okinawa, the site of bloody battles between U.S. and Japanese forces near the end of World War Two, have long objected to tens of thousands of U.S. troops and U.S. military installations on 18 percent of their island.

The island's governor, Takeshi Onaga, won election last year largely on his stand against U.S. bases, and has accused Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of looking down on the island and its people.

The government wants to move the U.S. Marines' Futenma base to another location on the southern island but Onaga and many residents want rid of it altogether.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said the break in construction would enable the two sides to "thoroughly discuss" the issue.

"The government will once again explain its thoughts on the relocation to the Okinawan side as part of concentrated discussions toward a solution," he told a news conference.

But Suga said there was no change in the government's stance.

The suspension of construction effectively takes the emotive issue off the table while the government pushes sensitive security bills through parliament.

A majority of Japanese oppose the security bills, which could allow Japanese troops to fight overseas for the first time since World War Two and are key to Prime Minister Abe's push for a more robust security stance.

The legislation has passed parliament's lower house and is

being debated in the upper chamber, but it has dragged down Abe's support rate to less than 40 percent.

Political commentator Atsuo Ito said Abe could not take such a hard line on the Okinawa base now that his popularity had been hit by the security bills.

"The government is really backed into a corner," Ito said.

"While Abe's support rate was high, he went ahead even in the face of opposition, but with his support down ... it's much harder to take a strong stance."

Ito said that with emotions running high on Okinawa, it was unlikely the suspension of construction would significantly soften Onaga's opposition.

"The central government is trying to be flexible, in the hope Okinawa will respond in kind," Ito said. "But it's unlikely that Onaga will back down much, so progress may be difficult."

Militants in Egypt Shell House in Sinai, Kill Family of 5

CAIRO (AP) — Militants in Egypt's restive northern Sinai shelled a house near a security checkpoint early on Tuesday, killing an entire family of five members inside it and wounding nine of their neighbors, Egyptian security officials said.

The checkpoint appeared to have been the intended target in the attack in the Sinai Peninsula town of Sheikh Zuweid, the officials said, though it was unclear why the house was shelled instead.

Three children were among those killed. The wounded were taken to the town hospital for treatment, the officials added, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to reporters.

Sinai-based Islamic militants have launched increasingly sophisticated attacks in recent months that have killed dozens

of Egyptian soldiers and police. Government forces have been carrying out an intensified hunt for the militants in several northern towns in the peninsula.

The latest surge in violence began after the Egyptian military overthrew Islamist President Mohammed Morsi two years ago, following mass protests against his rule.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for Tuesday's attack but an Islamic State affiliate has claimed responsibility for scores of deadly attacks targeting security forces in Sinai recently.

The attack comes two days before Egypt is to hold the grand opening of an extension to the Suez Canal, which separates the Sinai Peninsula from mainland Egypt — a major event set to attract scores of local and foreign dignitaries amid tight security.

Mediterranean Migrant Deaths in 2015 Tops 2,000: IOM

NEW YORK (Press TV) — The International Organization for Migration (IOM) says more than 2,000 migrants, who tried to reach Europe via the Mediterranean

The organization further noted that the route to Greece, with an inflow of 90,500 migrants so far this year and only about 60 deaths, is much safer than the one to Italy.



**This photo taken on May 28, 2015 shows hundreds of migrants in an overcrowded boat in the Mediterranean Sea just north of the coast of Libya.

this year, have lost their lives in the perilous journey across the sea.

"Unfortunately, we have now reached a milestone whereby over 2,000 migrants and refugees have died as of this past weekend," Itayi Virri, a spokesman for the IOM, said on Tuesday.

Also in a statement, the organization said the number of deaths so far this year proves "this route as the deadliest" one for migrants seeking to reach Europe for a better life.

Meanwhile, IOM Director General William Lacy Swing said, "It is unacceptable that in the 21st century people fleeing from conflict, persecutions, misery and land degradation must endure such terrible experiences in their home countries, not to mention en route, and then die on Europe's doorstep."

Nearly half of the people who have crossed the Mediterranean so far this year have landed in Italy and the other half in Greece.

In its statement, the IOM said approximately 1,930 migrants trying to reach Italy, which has seen an inflow of around 97,000 migrants so far this year, have died.

The IOM also said around 188,000 migrants have been rescued in the Mediterranean so far this year, adding that as many as 1,607 migrants died in the same period last year.

Most of the refugees who risk their lives to reach Europe are fleeing misery-stricken conflict-zones in the Middle East and Africa.

Czech President Milos Zeman said in an interview with the Czech-language daily Blesk the Western states' military intervention in the Middle East and North Africa is responsible for the increasing influx of migrants into Europe.

"The current wave of migration [to Europe] is rooted in the crazy [US] idea to launch an intervention in Iraq, which allegedly had weapons of mass destruction, but nothing was found," Zeman said.

Zeman went on to say that Washington's desire to "restore order" in Libya and Syria only resulted in the escalation of conflicts in both Arab countries plus the rise of terrorist organizations, subsequently prompting people to flee the troubled areas.



BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union and Vietnam clinched on Tuesday an agreement in principle on a new free trade deal that would see the lifting of most tariffs on goods.

The EU's top trade official, Cecilia Malmstrom, said the pact would "provide significant new opportunities for companies on both sides, by increasing market access for goods and services."

Vietnam has a growing and dynamic market of some 90 million consumers and officials expect the pact to spur European investment in the South East Asian nation. Goods trade between the two economies totaled more than 28 billion euros (\$30.75 billion) last year, and the EU is Vietnam's second trading partner after China.

The agreement comes after two and a half years of talks. Experts must now iron out remaining technical issues, such as dispute settlement, before the deal can be officially approved by EU member states and the European Parliament. Malmstrom said it could enter force by late 2017 or early 2018.

Under the deal, Vietnam would liberalize trade in financial services, telecommunications, transport, and postal and courier services over 10 years. EU duties would be eliminated over a 7-year period.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Several U.S. politicians sharply criticized the Obama administration over an annual global report on human trafficking in response to a Reuters article chronicling how senior U.S. diplomats had watered down rankings of more than a dozen strategically important countries.

Democratic Senator Bob Menendez called the account "alarming & unacceptable if true", tweeting that "we must get to the bottom of this" at a Senate hearing set for Thursday to re-view the 2015 Trafficking in Persons report.

A Reuters examination, based on interviews with more than a dozen people in Washington and foreign capitals, showed that the State Department office set up to independently grade global efforts to fight human trafficking was repeatedly overruled by senior diplomats and pressured into inflating assessments of 14 countries in this year's report.

Among the countries that received higher rankings than recommended by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons were Malaysia, Cuba, China, India, Uzbekistan and Mexico, the sources said.

"It's shameful that President Obama allowed a bunch of political hacks to alter the administration's human trafficking report to the benefit of perennial violators like Cuba and Malaysia," said U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, who is also a Republican presidential candidate.

KUALA LUMPUR (Press TV) — A Malaysian search team has found more plane debris on a French Indian Ocean island, where a Boeing flaperon turned up last week, giving hopes of a clue to the destiny of the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370.

"As of today, we have found debris, but it is yet to be confirmed to be from MH370. We did collect some additional debris from the beach," Malaysian Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai said in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, state-run Turkish Anadolu Agency re-ported.

He said that "some wreckage, some sort of aluminum frame, some sort of broken pieces of material from a plane" had been found, but investigative teams still had to verify which plane they belonged to.

Carrying 227 passengers and 12 crews, Flight MH370 departed from the Malaysian capital for the Chinese capital city of Beijing on March 8, 2014. It, however, lost contact with Malaysia Airlines half an hour later and vanished mysteriously at night over the South China Sea.

On July 29, a two-meter long piece of wreckage was found by people cleaning up a beach of the French La Reunion Island, east of Madagascar, some 6,000 kilometers (3,730 miles) away from the last known location of the doomed flight.

South Korea Replaces Health Minister Over MERS Crisis

SEOUL (Press TV) — South Korean President Park Geun-hye has dismissed her health minister, who was severely criticized for the

MERS outbreak outside Saudi Arabia, was re-placed by Seoul National University hospital Professor Chung Chin-young,

Although no new MERS infections have been reported since July 4, the World Health Organization (WHO) standards urge a four-week waiting period after the last MERS patient completely recovers before declaring the outbreak definitively over.

The South Korean government has come under intense public pressure for failing to promptly cope with MERS in the early stages of its outbreak in May.

The MERS outbreak hit South Korea hard in terms of psychological impacts on citizens. Some reportedly even felt reluctant to go shopping for infection fears.

The outbreak also had a disastrous effect on the economy, with a 40-percent fall in the number of foreign visitors to South Korea. At least 130,000 foreign tourists canceled their travel plan to the country in June alone over MERS fears, according to government officials.



South Korean President Park Geun-hye

government's poor re-sponse to the recent outbreak of MERS in the Asian country.

Moon Hyong-pyo, who had himself proposed to resign after apologizing to the public for the anger caused by the biggest

the president's office said in a Tuesday statement.

The reshuffle came a week after Seoul announced an effective end to the MERS outbreak, with just one patient undergoing treatment in hospital.